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Living **ON THE EDGE**

An Overview of Deer Management in Maine

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Maine deer are widely loved and appreciated by the public and are important contributors to the state's economy. Deer populations in northern, eastern, and western Maine are below the Department's publicly derived population goals for deer. This has translated into a decline in deer hunting and viewing opportunity having a negative impact on Maine businesses.

WHAT ARE THE FACTORS AFFECTING DEER IN NORTHERN, WESTERN, AND EASTERN MAINE?

White-tails are near the northern limit of their range in Maine and do not occur in viable numbers north of the St. Lawrence River. Consequently, there are several inter-related factors that are likely causing low deer numbers in northern,

For Your Information

The asterisks * throughout this article denote information that is available on our website:

www.mefishwildlife.com.

If you're unable to access the Internet, please call the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife at (207) 287-8000 or send a letter to

MDIF&W

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MDIF&W Photos by Travis Barrett (above) and Kendall Marden (below)

MDIF&W Assistant Regional Wildlife Biologist Allen Starr and Deer and Moose Biologist Lee Kantar prepare for take off to conduct aerial deer surveys. (Below) A view from the helicopter of our partner, the Maine Forest Service.

eastern and western Maine. These include:

1. Winter severity – three of the most severe winters of the past 60 years occurred in 2001, 2007, and 2008;
2. Diminished number and quality of deer wintering areas [DWAs];
3. Predation, and
4. Other mortality factors [illegal hunting, food quality, improper supplemental feeding, vehicle collisions, etc.].

HOW DOES MDIF&W MANAGE DEER IN MAINE?

White-tailed deer are a public resource, but their habitat is privately owned. The Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife [MDIF&W or Department] manages Maine's deer population to ensure a healthy, secure population for both viewing and hunting, but at a balance that is mindful of other biological, social, and economic considerations. Management of deer habitat depends on a partnership between the Department and private landowners.

- **Public sets management direction** – In 1999 the Big Game Public Working Group, comprised of stakeholders having diverse interests in deer, considered deer management issues for several months and recommended deer management goals and objectives that covered the entire state for the period 2000-2015.



- **Biological data from annual deer harvest** - Each year Department biologists collect biological information from 4,000 - 5,000 hunter-killed deer to assess the health and condition of Maine's deer herd.
- **Monitoring winter severity** – Since the 1950s

Department biologists have been monitoring winter conditions [temperature, snow depths, deer sinking depths, and snow profile characteristics] throughout the state from early December through late April to estimate the impact of winter conditions on deer mortality.

- **DWA aerial and ground surveys** – Each winter MDIF&W biologists survey DWAs to update and maintain records of historical and active DWAs throughout the state.
- **Manage DWAs on state lands** – MDIF&W manages 8,700 acres of DWAs on Department-owned lands and assists the Bureau of Parks and Lands with management on an additional 29,000 acres.
- **Cooperative DWA management / agreements** – The Department works with many landowners on some level of collaboratively planned wintering habitat management impacting almost 300,000 acres of winter habitat.
- **State acquisition of important winter habitat for deer** – Funding opportunities are limited, but when available the State has pursued fee acquisition of important DWAs; conservation easements purchased by the State have included provisions for managing winter habitat.
- **Productivity and recruitment surveys** – Production and survival of fawns into the population is important to the growth of the deer herd. The Department is collecting road-killed does and counting the number of fetuses per female to derive an index to fawn productivity and to provide information on breeding chronology.
- **Chronic Wasting Disease monitoring** – For more than 10 years, the Departments of Agriculture, USDA-Wildlife Services, and Inland Fisheries and Wildlife have monitored for CWD -- a fatal disease of the nervous system of deer – and worked to prevent its introduction.
- **Annual surveys of deer and moose hunters** - Annually, the Department conducts surveys of deer and moose hunters to derive an index of deer abundance. Unfortunately, hunter response rates are often low and provide an inadequate sample size.

WHAT IS BEING DONE TO INCREASE DEER NUMBERS IN NORTHERN, WESTERN, AND EASTERN MAINE?

Increasing Maine's deer herd will require the collaborative efforts and resources of the Department, sportsmen's groups, landowners, interested citizens, and other partners. The effort is challenging, and progress will take time. Still, we are forging partnerships *and we have accomplished much during the past 18 months.*

- **Deer management planning** - Low deer population concerns in northern, western, and eastern Maine have been intensifying for nearly 20 years and were topics explored in depth in 1993 by the Downeast Deer Committee, in 1999 by the Big Game Public Working Group, in 2007 by the Northern and Eastern Maine Deer Task Force [LD 823]*, and in 2008 by the Deer Predation Working Group [LD 2288]*. Implementation of these recommendations guides the Department's deer management program as we work to rebuild northern, western, and eastern deer populations.



- **DWA management guidelines** – *Guidelines for Wildlife: Managing Deer Wintering Areas in Northern, Western and Eastern Maine** is the result of an extraordinary collaboration between private landowners and the Department to develop biologically sound management guidelines for DWAs. These guidelines promote 1] improved landowner knowledge of the ecological value of DWAs, and enhanced DWA management, 2] improved communications among landowners, loggers, foresters, and Department biologists. They seek to increase the number of managed DWAs.
- **Cooperative DWA management / agreements** – MDIFW continues to expand cooperative working relationships between landowners and MDIF&W to improve the identification and monitoring of DWAs and to promote information sharing to guide timber harvesting.
- **DWA management programs and workshops** – MDIF&W is coordinating with SWOAM, Maine SFI Implementation Committee, Maine Forest Products Council, Certified Logging Professional program, and landowner initiatives to offer DWA management programs. To date, programs have reached more than 200 landowners, loggers and foresters throughout Maine.
- **Helicopter surveys** – MDIF&W and the Maine Forest Service are conducting helicopter surveys of deer in central and southern Maine to estimate deer abundance as we work toward re-calibrating the deer population model.
- **Identifying areas of high road mortality** - Department biologists partnered with the Department of Transportation to develop a highly visible deer crossing sign and are installing signs as we identify high deer collision areas.
- **Winter deer feeding** - Supplemental feeding is discouraged by the Department as it draws deer near roads where they are susceptible to vehicle collisions, cause malnutrition, and/or increase coyote and free-roaming predation. MDIF&W has increased its efforts to inform landowners of alternatives that



improve deer habitat naturally, as in the publication *Winter Feeding of Deer – What You Should Know**.

- **Coyote night-hunting season extended** – To provide additional coyote night-hunting opportunities and address deer predation by coyotes, the 124th Legislature extended the coyote night-hunting season to run from Dec. 16 to Aug. 31. Previously it ended on June 1.
- **Targeted and focused coyote hunting** - As incidences are brought to our attention, Department biologists continue to work with coyote hunters and have agreed to work with the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine Coyote Hunting Network to direct coyote hunting into DWAs experiencing predation.
- **Hunting season restrictions** - The Department's Fish and Wildlife Advisory Council approved a rule in which any Wildlife Management District designated bucks-only during the regular firearms deer season would also be bucks-only for all deer hunting seasons, including archery and youth. NEMDTF recommended this rule.
- **Exploring additional funding for deer management** - MDIF&W is exploring additional funding opportunities for deer management.
- **Education and outreach** – MDIF&W has developed a number of news articles on deer and deer management

appearing in the Department's online magazine and several landowner newsletters such as *How Deer Survive Winter**. The Department's Wildlife Division Webpage is being redesigned and will prominently feature a variety of informational materials on deer and deer management.

HOW CAN OUR OUTDOOR PARTNERS HELP?

There are several areas where the Department could benefit greatly from public support and that of our outdoor partners:

1. Coordinate efforts with outdoor partners to improve deer hunter survey response rates;
2. Implement SAM's coyote-network to direct hunting to DWAs identified by the Department;
3. Coordinate with outdoor partners to compile information for landowners about food plots and habitat management and to promote these activities;
4. Improve promotion and awareness of current-use tax programs that provide landowners with incentives to manage deer habitat; and
5. Explore additional funding opportunities for the Department to help achieve these goals and others more swiftly.